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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the accuracy of public perceptions of public reactions to a politically problematic situation, the return of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. The analysis sought to relate differential patterns of communication behavior related to pluralistic ignorance (shared incorrect beliefs about the beliefs and actions of other people) with a cross-section survey. Subjects, 624 Hong Kong residents, were interviewed over the telephone about the Draft Agreement between Great Britain and the People's Republic of China. Attitudes on interpersonal communication and media use were also measured. Findings indicate that a majority of the Hong Kong respondents were able to estimate accurately the distribution of opinion regarding the approval/disapproval of the Draft Agreement, possibly due to the generous media coverage. A majority also felt that it was the most important issue facing the residents of Hong Kong. However, patterns of pluralistic ignorance did appear in the data. Also, findings showed that the remainder of the communication variables examined in the study appear inadequate to the task in explaining the complex relationship among interpersonal communication and mass media variables and pluralistic ignorance. (Six tables and seven notes are included, and 31 references are appended.) (MS)

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PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE AND COMMUNICATION ABOUT A CRITICAL POLITICAL ISSUE

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ABSTRACT: Although not a new concept, pluralistic ignorance has received limited attention in public opinion research. This study assesses the accuracy of public perceptions of public reaction to a politically problematic situation, the return of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. This analysis seeks to relate differential patterns of communication behavior related to pluralistic ignorance with a cross-section survey. Although the findings suggest that a majority of Hong Kong respondents were able to accurately estimate the distribution of opinion regarding the approval/disapproval of the Draft Agreement, two patterns of pluralistic ignorance appeared in the data. The data indicate that Hong Kong residents who were sufficiently attentive to the news were better able to more accurately estimate the distribution of opinion.

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PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE AND COMMUNICATION ABOUT A CRITICAL POLITICAL ISSUE

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion boasts an inveterate history of critical inquiry as to its fundamental liaison with the political theatre. Hume wrote: "It is, therefore, on opinion only that government is founded." Although the definition of public opinion varies, the theoretical roots of public opinion rest within the social structure underlying the society's political ideology.

Cooley (1926) defined social knowledge based on individuals' "perceptions of the intercommunicating behavior of men, and experiences of the processes of mind that go with it" (p. 64). Similarly, Allport (1937) describes public opinion as a function of communication behavior among individuals within a social structure in reference to some relevant issue. Individuals act under the assumption that other members of the public hold similar opinions with respect to the issue in question. In terms of the public opinion process, a critical question arises as to how individuals perceive or misperceive public opinion.

This study assesses the accuracy of public perceptions of public reactions to a politically problematic situation, the return of the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. This analysis seeks to relate differential patterns of communication behavior related to pluralistic ignorance with a cross-section survey.

Sociological theory postulates that individuals perceive and interpret their environment through social interaction (Merton, 1968). Lack of interaction characterized by inadequate interpersonal communication and/or

use of mass media may lead to substantial inaccuracies in the perception of small group and public opinion. Yet, much past public opinion research has disregarded the function of communication variables in the process. Those studies examining pluralistic ignorance, the phenomenon of individuals' misperceptions of the opinions held by others, rarely have probed the underlying factors contributing to the ignorance (Katz & Allport, 1931; Breed & Ktsanes, 1961; O'Gorman, 1975; Fields & Schuman, 1976-77).

Breed and Ktsanes (1961) suggested that the lack of pluralistic ignorance in their cross-section sample might have been attributed to the heavy media coverage of the desegregation issue prior to the study; however, this was a post-research hypothesis since media variables were not analyzed in the study. Although Katz and Allport (1931) stressed the significance of patterns of pluralistic ignorance in developing a better understanding of public opinion, interest in the relationship between media variables and public perceptions of the climate of opinion was meager until Noelle-Neumann (1974) proposed her theory of the spiral of silence.

Despite the manifest interdependent relationship between public opinion and communication behavior, the development of a body of systematic public opinion research incorporating interpersonal and mass communication variables within a sociological framework remains a frontier.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, pluralistic ignorance refers to shared incorrect beliefs about the beliefs and actions of other people. Merton (1968) distinguishes between two forms of pluralistic ignorance. In the first pattern, individuals presume that their opinions are held in isolation. In the second pattern, termed "looking glass perception," individuals presume that their opinions are shared in common with others. Elaborating on the perceptual processes, Merton (1968) suggests that individuals utilize a "mechanism of observability" to assess the distribution of opinions among others particularly those within a reference group (Note 1).

Although not a new concept, pluralistic ignorance has received limited attention in public opinion research (Note 2). Nevertheless the topic presents communication researchers with an intriguing basis upon which to investigate the relationship between communication variables and opinion. For the most part, the literature suggests that most people can provide an estimate of what they believe other people think, and that these estimates are correlated with their own opinions (Taylor, 1982). What the public opinion literature does not show is where and how communication might be related to the accuracy of these perceptions.

Although several of the pluralistic ignorance studies (Breed & Ktsanes, 1961; Fields & Schuman, 1976-77) suggest communication must account for some of the variations in accuracy of the perceptions, interpersonal and/or mass communication "rarely gets identified as an important causal mechanism in analysis of major systemic shifts" (Chaffee, 1975, p. 86). Yet, media do provide political information that affect knowledge and perception (Becker, McCombs, & McLeod, 1975), and people do talk about what

they hear and read (Atkin, 1972; Atwood, 1980; Chaffee 1975; Edelstein & Larson, 1960).

Chaffee (1972, p. 98) suggests that a "principal function of the mass media may be to facilitate interpersonal communication." He notes that a person who knows nothing of a subject may learn something about it from the media before talking with others, thus avoiding displaying his/her lack of knowledge. On the other hand, where the topic is of widespread importance and heavily covered in the mass media, the media coverage may lead to discussion.

Breed and Ktsanes (1961) analyzed attitudes toward desegregation in a two-sample survey in New Orleans. Although they found pluralistic ignorance in both samples, a proportionally larger number of respondents in the more homogeneous church sample were ignorant than were respondents in the city-wide probability sample. Those respondents in the church who described themselves as tolerant of desegregation were more likely to perceive others as much less tolerant. This tendency toward "conservative bias" was also evident in the probability sample although to a lesser degree since the city residents generally were less ignorant (Note 3).

In contrast, those individuals who were much less tolerant of desegregation were more likely to perceive others as believing the way they did. In the church sample those holding this "looking glass perception" were more likely to have less education. One of the more important findings was that individuals whose attitudes were in the direction of change were more likely to be more accurate assessors of the actual distribution of opinion than were those holding less liberal views.

Breed and Ktsanes (1961) predicted that proportionally more respondents in the probability sample would be pluralistically ignorant since there should be less intercommunication within the larger heterogeneous group.

The findings contradicted the hypothesis. To account for this contradiction, they postulated that "level of crystallization" may explain the discrepancy. Within the homogeneous church group comprised of white middle to upper-middle income respondents, the issue of desegregation was not salient. Therefore, there was probably less intercommunication about the issue since it was not highly involving. However, respondents from the city sample found the issue more salient since they were less likely to possess the means to avoid desegregation. The authors postulated that mass media and interpersonal communication variables assumed a role in the crystallization process. If this were the case, the media's coverage of federal desegregation court orders and commentary coupled with respondents' information seeking and processing behaviors would contribute to the decrease in pluralistic ignorance in part because those holding the changing view become more noticeably identified as a marginal minority.

The importance of the Breed and Ktsanes (1961) study for communication research is their acknowledgement of the potential effects of communication variables on the public opinion process particularly where issues of social change are concerned. When an issue is crystallized, the role of pluralistic ignorance in reinforcing and maintaining the status quo decreases because once an opinion change has crystallized publicity acts as a means to make what was once thought to be a liberal minority opinion the norm (Katz, 1981). Thus, for certain issues, communication variables counteract the role of pluralistic ignorance in reinforcing traditional beliefs.

In a study of racial opinions in Detroit, Fields and Schumann (1976-77) investigated respondents' perceptions of their neighbors' opinions and "most Detroiters' opinions." It is the perception of "most others" that

Noelle-Neumann (1980) refers to in her research. Before analyzing the data to confirm trends of pluralistic ignorance, the researchers controlled for "disowning projection," that is, that when survey questions reflect sensitive issues (e.g., racial issues) individuals may report more liberal views themselves while reporting more conservative views for others which in fact are a more accurate assessment of their own opinions. The findings did not substantiate any evidence of "disowning projection."

Fields and Schuman (1976-77) did find that the theoretical assumptions that reseachers use to explain pluralistic ignorance did vary depending upon whether issues were racial or nonracial. For nonracial issues, pluralistically ignorant respondents' perceptions were more likely to be characterized as "looking glass perceptions." However, for more sensitive issues (i.e., racial issues) ignorant respondents' perceptions were more likely to be evidence of "conservative bias."

It is difficult to assess whether individuals thought to hold "looking-glass perceptions" simply project their opinions onto others or whether they adopt the beliefs that they perceive to be held by a majority of others. Upon closer examination of the data, a paradox surfaces. Respondents with "looking-glass perceptions" constitute a minority perceiving themselves as a majority, whereas respondents with "conservatively biased perceptions" make up a majority perceiving themselves as a minority. Fields and Schuman (1976-77) postulated that it was more likely for "looking-glass perceptions" to occur when individuals had limited information about an issue. This hypothesis appears to support Breed and Ktsanes (1961) crystallization hypothesis. However, since Fields and Schuman (1976-77) did not include communication variables in the study, the role of information in the process is only hypothesized.

In a series of studies of racial perceptions, O'Gorman (1975; 1979) and

O'Gorman and Garry (1976-77) found patterns of pluralistic ignorance. In their analysis of white attitudes toward desegregation, O'Gorman and Garry 1976-77) uncovered a tendency toward "conservative bias" among whites favoring desegregation and a tendency toward "looking-glass perceptions" among whites favoring segregation. The distinctions are fairly clear. Individuals holding traditional beliefs tend to perceive others as holding similar attitudes, whereas individuals who favor a more liberal viewpoint, one of social change, tend to view others as holding the more conservative viewpoint.

In a study of white and black perceptions of desegregation, O'Gorman (1979) found that whites favoring segregation were more likely to perceive blacks as segregationists as well. Blacks, on the other hand, were far more likely to overestimate the percentage of whites favoring desegregation. O'Gorman found further support for his contention that individuals, regardless of race, were more likely to share the same perceptions of the actual distribution of opinions if they shared the same racial values and not just social status. Thus, individuals sharing the same cultural values tend to make similar cognitive judgments about the perceived climate of opinion.

For environmental issues, Taylor (1982) found that advocates of stronger environmental regulation perceived themselves to be in the majority, and they perceived that a majority of others held the same opinions. Similarly, opponents of stronger environmental regulation held the same perception of being in the majority. Taylor (1982) argued that the "looking-glass perception" accounts for the findings. Although Taylor did not raise the issue, it could also be argued that since the issues were highly crystallized among respondents in the sample, advocates of stronger

regulation were not merely perceiving others to believe as they did, but rather because their opinions were balanced in the direction of social change, they were more accurate assessors of public opinion. The advocates were not ignorant; in fact they were able to accurately perceive public opinion.

Noelle-Neumann (1980) argued that individuals who hold opinions that are in the direction of change are likely to be more accurate in assessing the distribution of opinion and more confident in their own positions. Taylor (1982) found that respondents who believed themselves to be in the majority were more self-assured of their opinions than were respondents who believed themselves to be members of the minority.

The findings of these studies can be summarized as follows. Overall, levels of pluralistic ignorance are quite high. O'Gorman (1979, p. 53) found error rates ranging from "34 percent among those in favor of desegregation" to "79 percent of those who favored strict racial segregation." Second, in matters of racial attitudes, the more tolerant are the most accurate in predicting public opinion. Third, among whites the most tolerant exhibit a "conservative bias" and report others as being less tolerant. On the other hand, the less tolerant are characterized by a "looking glass perception" and also report others as unfavorable to racial desegregation. Blacks also report a "looking glass perception" but estimate public opinion to be more favorable toward desegregation. For non-racial issues the perceptions of both the pluralistically ignorant and the non-ignorant may be characterized as a "looking glass" response.

For the most part, research examining pluralistic ignorance has focused on the relationship between public opinion and racial and environmental issues. This study attempts to examine patterns of pluralistic ignorance within the context of a politically charged issue, the return of the

British Crown Colony of Hong Kong to the governing power of the People's Republic of China.

Before enumerating the hypotheses, a brief description of the setting of the survey is in order. The backdrop of this study focuses on a series of events which led to the initialling of an agreement between the governments of Great Britain and the People's Republic of China that details the return of the British Crown Colony to China's control effective 1 July 1997. The Draft Agreement between the two countries was initialled on 26 September 1984.

In the fall of 1982, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's visit to Beijing made manifest the reality of the Crown Colony's return to China's control in 1997. While the '1997' issue was widely publicized in the Hong Kong media during the two years following Thatcher's visit, the indeterminancy was settled by the signing of the agreement in December 1984 which granted Hong Kong another 50 years of capitalist life after 1997 as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (Note 4).

The data analyzed in this study were collected in January 1985, less than a month following the signing of the Agreement. Following the initialling of the Agreement in September 1984, copies of the Draft Agreement appeared in Hong Kong newspapers and the Government Information Office distributed copies throughout the colony. Furthermore, 23 opinion polls were conducted regarding the acceptability of the Agreement to Hong Kong residents between late September and mid-November 1984 (White Paper, 29 November 1984). In view of the heavy publicity during the two years of negotiation and the campaign to win public approval for the Agreement, it would appear that the issue was crystallized.

In the context of the pluralistic ignorance literature, a distribution

of opinion exists regarding the approval of the Draft Agreement among the Hong Kong population, and members of the public are able to estimate the direction of that distribution. For 46 percent of the respondents, '1997' was the most important issue facing the Crown Colony.

In view of the aforementioned, it is expected that:

H1: The actual and perceived distributions of opinion regarding the approval of the Draft Agreement will be correlated.

H2: Proportionally more of those who disapprove of the agreement than of those who approve of it will inaccurately perceive the distribution of opinion.

H3: Proportionally fewer of those reporting higher levels of attention to the news about '1997' will exhibit pluralistic ignorance.

H4: Proportionally more of those paying the least attention to news about '1997' will inaccurately estimate the reported distribution of attention.

H5: Proportionally more of the non-ignorant than ignorant will report talking about '1997' (a) at home, (b) at work, (c) on the telephone, and (d) while shopping.

H6: Proportionally more of the non-ignorant than ignorant will report reading a newspaper (a) daily and (b) today.

H7: Pluralistic ignorance will not be related to listening to either (a) television news or (b) radio news.

H8: Proportionally more respondents who read the agreement than those who did not read it will report more frequent newspaper use.

METHOD

The data were collected via telephone interviews from 624 Hong Kong residents during January 1985. The telephone numbers were selected using interval techniques from the approximately 1.3 million listings in the three Hong Kong residential telephone directories. Replacement numbers were also drawn proportionally by interval procedures from the three directories. Replacement numbers were randomly assigned in instances of refusals and where there was no answer at the original number.

Interviewers were students in the Department of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong who received training in interviewing techniques prior to data collection. All interviewers were native Cantonese speakers who were also fluent in English.

The questionnaire was first written in English, translated into Chinese, translated back into English, and then translated again into Chinese. Only when all four versions were considered equivalent was the questionnaire considered appropriate for the survey. Analysis of respondent demographics suggests that while the data were collected from a broad cross-section, respondents tend to be younger and better educated than would be expected from Hong Kong census data.

To measure the distribution of opinion, respondents were asked to provide their own opinion of the Draft Agreement, and then to assess how they thought most people in Hong Kong felt about the Agreement (Note 5). The first two hypotheses were tested by correlating the responses to the two items and then by using two-way crossbreaks to determine the proportion of pluralistically ignorant respondents within the sample.

Interpersonal communication was measured by four dichotomous items asking if the respondent had talked about the future of Hong Kong at home,

at work, at a store, or on the telephone. The hypotheses regarding interpersonal communication behavior were tested using three-way crossbreaks controlling for ignorance. The variable ignorance was created by recoding the data shown in Table 1 into two categories, ignorant and non-ignorant.

Media use was measured by four dichotomous items asking if the respondent read a newspaper or magazine, watched a television newscast or listened to radio news "today." Frequency of newspaper reading was measured by asking "Many people don't read a newspaper every day. In general, how often do you read a newspaper?" The response alternatives were (1) less than daily, and (2) daily. The hypotheses regarding mass media use were tested using three-way crossbreaks controlling for ignorance.

FINDINGS

Before assessing the hypotheses, it might be well to establish the relative importance of the '1997' issue to the residents of Hong Kong. Overall, 46.2% of the respondents felt it was the most important problem facing the Crown Colony. This proportion is significantly larger than the 10.6% found in February 1983 about six months after Thatcher's trip to Beijing. However, it is significantly smaller than the 54.6% of May 1983 (Atwood & Cheng, 1986). While the data do not point directly to a cause of the decline in problem importance between May 1983 and January 1985, it seems likely it is a result of the signing of the agreement (Note 5).

Overall, 56.5% said the '1997' issue was somewhat important (22.3%) or very important (21.5%) to them and their families. Only 9.6% of the respondents refused to give their opinions of whether or not the Agreement was good for Hong Kong, but 16.8% refused to say how they thought others felt about the Agreement.

The actual and perceived distributions of opinions regarding approval of the Draft Agreement were significantly correlated ($r = 0.665$, $p < 0.001$) as predicted. Hypothesis 1 is retained.

An examination of the actual distribution of opinions indicates that more than eight in ten of the respondents (84.8%) felt that the agreement was "good" while only 15.2% felt it was "not good." (Table 1) Of those who perceived the agreement as good, more than nine in ten (92.0%) were able to assess correctly the opinions of other people who felt that the agreement was good. In contrast, just three in ten of those who felt the agreement was not good (31.6%) correctly assessed public opinion.

TABLE 1. Number and Proportion of Respondents Correctly and Incorrectly Assessing Public Approval/Disapproval of the Agreement on the Return of Hong Kong to China.

Believing Agreement is Good/Not Good		Perception of Others: Correct (Good)	Perception of Others: Not Correct (Not Good)	Total
Good	n	390	34	424
	%	92.0	8.0	84.8
Not Good	n	24	52	76
	%	31.6	68.4	15.2
Total	n	414	86	500
	%	82.8	17.2	100.0

Chi squard = 32.6 (df=1) $p < .001$

An examination of the actual and estimated distributions of those respondents who perceived that the agreement was good yields an overestimate by 7.2 percentage points of the estimated distribution. In contrast, examining the difference between the actual and estimated distributions among those respondents who felt that the agreement was not good makes manifest an underestimate of 53.2 percentage points.

The findings support the second hypothesis that proportionally more of those who disapprove of the agreement than those who approve of it will inaccurately estimate the distribution of opinion. Of the 15.2% of the respondents who felt that the agreement "not good," 31.6% reported that they felt that others held different opinions. This compares with erroneous perceptions of only 8.0% of those who believed the agreement was good and whose opinions were, in fact, in the majority.

The strong correlation between the respondents' "own" evaluation of the

Agreement and their perceptions of the "others" assessment of the Agreement can be attributed to at least three "causes:" (1) a projection of their own beliefs to others, the "looking glass" effect, (2) their adoption of what they perceive to be majority opinion, or (3) reasonable accurate perceptions resulting from on-going communication. It is the third reason that was assumed here, and the hypotheses specifically link pluralistic ignorance and communication variables.

Breed and Ktsanes (1961) among others (Davison, 1983; Fields & Schuman 1976-77; O'Gorman, 1979) have suggested that interpersonal communication and mass media can play an important part in the perception of other people's beliefs. As the following tables show, there is a significant relationship between reported attention to the news about '1997' and pluralistic ignorance. However, as will be seen, specific communication variables fare less well than does the more general attention measure as an explanation of pluralistic ignorance.

TABLE 2. Number and Proportion of Respondents Who Attended to '1997' News by Pluralistic Ignorance.

Attend to news about '1997'		Ignorant: Yes	Ignorant: No	Total
Little/ None	n	26	80	106
	%	24.5	75.5	21.3
Some	n	59	333	392
	%	15.1	84.9	78.7
Total	n	85	435	498
	%	17.1	82.9	100.0

Chi square = 5.29 (df=1) $p < .025$

Proportionally more of the ignorant who paid little or no attention to the news about '1997' (24.5%) misperceived the majority opinion than did those who paid at least "some" attention (15.1%) to the news (Table 2). Hypothesis 3 is retained. Although it is not conclusive evidence, this suggests that Hong Kong residents could, if sufficiently attentive to the news, obtain a rough idea of the overall tenor of public opinion. However, it is necessary to remember that "published opinion" is not necessarily the same as public opinion. Opinions that appear in the pages of the newspaper may well represent only the views of the elite who have ready access to the media or of dissidents who have managed to gain the attention of the media (Note 7).

A second perceptual measure, one of public behavior, was obtained by asking the extent to which repondents thought most people were attending to the news about '1997.' These outcomes are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Number and Proportion of Respondents Who Attended to '1997' News by Perceptions of Others Attending to the News.

		Others Attend		
Attend to news about '1997'		Little/ None	Some	Total
Little/ None	n	43	117	160
	%	26.9	73.1	26.6
Some	n	41	401	442
	%	9.3	90.7	73.4
Total	n	84	518	602
	%	14.0	68.0	100.0

Chi square = 28.86 (df=1) $p < .001$

The data indicate that those who said they paid little or no attention to the news were remarkably accurate in their assessments of attention to the news while those who reported paying at least "some" attention were significantly less accurate. Of the 26.6% of the respondents who reported paying little or no attention, 26.9% said other people were paying little or no attention. On the other hand, of the 73.4% who reported paying at least some attention to the news, only 9.3% estimated the public was paying little or no attention. The findings do not support Hypothesis 4 which specified that those paying the least attention to the news would do the poorest job of estimating public attention to the news. The hypothesis is rejected.

This outcome is contrary to the finding in the case with estimates of approval of the Agreement where both groups exhibited a strong "looking glass" response. Only those paying the most attention to the news show a strong looking-glass effect. Those paying less attention correctly estimated that seven in ten respondents would report paying at least "some" attention to the news. Because neither mass media use nor interpersonal communication was related to general attention to the news about '1997,' it seems likely that the 17 point over-estimate by the heavier news consumers results from the "looking-glass" effect. The extreme accuracy of the lighter news users does not lend itself to ready explanation.

Pluralistic Ignorance and Communication

As noted above, there have been several suggestions that pluralistic ignorance is probably related to interpersonal communication and use of the mass media. If so, it is a more complex relationship than those explored here, or the communication variables used here are inadequate to the task. Only one communication variable, talking about '1997' while at work,

distinguishes between those who do and do not exhibit pluralistic ignorance (Table 4).

Proportionally more of the pluralistically ignorant (61.6%) than non-ignorant (47.6%) reported talking about the '1997' problem while at work. Thus it appears that those who are least able to estimate the climate of opinion are most likely to talk about the issue.

Contrary to expectations, pluralistic ignorance is not related to talking about the '1997' problem at home, on the telephone, or while

TABLE 4. Number and Proportion of Respondents Reporting Talking About the '1997' Issue at Work

		Talk at Work		
Ignorant		Yes	No	Total
Yes	n	53	33	86
	%	61.6	38.4	17.2
No	n	197	217	414
	%	47.6	52.4	82.8
Total	n	250	250	500
	%	50.0	50.0	100.0

Chi square = 5.61 (df=1) $p < .05$

shopping. Nor, contrary to expectations, was pluralistic ignorance related to newspaper or magazine reading. These hypotheses are rejected. However, as hypothesized, pluralistic ignorance was not related to listening to television news or radio news. Hypotheses 7a and 7b are retained. Nor is there any difference in proportions of ignorant and non-ignorant reporting reading the Agreement itself. Overall, 32.9% reported they had not read the Agreement, 52.9% reported they had read some of the Agreement, and only

14.2% reported having read all of the document.

The overall reported discussion levels about '1997' involved 62.9% (393) of the respondents. The largest proportion who reported talking about the problem did so at work (50.0%) compared with only 16.5% who reported discussing the issue with someone on the telephone. Nearly four respondents in ten reported talking about the issue at home (39.7%) or with someone in a store (39.3%). Of those 393 respondents who reported talking about the issue, 45.5% reported that from the discussion they learned something useful in understanding the problem of the future of Hong Kong.

Reported media use also varied substantially. Overall, 414 respondents (66.5%) reported watching television news "today," and 58.7% reported reading a newspaper "today." Only 16.1% reported reading a magazine, and 40.5% reported listening to radio news.

TABLE 5. Number and Proportion of Respondents Reading the Agreement by Reported Talking about '1997' at Home, at Work, on the Telephone, and in a Store (Non-Pluralistically Ignorant Respondents Only).

Read the Agreement		Home (n=414)	Work (n=414)	Telephone (n=414)	Store (n=414)
No	n	47	50	15	41
	%	35.6	37.9	11.4	31.1
Some	n	101	126	39	107
	%	45.9	57.3	17.7	48.6
All	n	38	41	23	31
	%	61.3	66.1	37.1	50.0
Total	n	186	217	77	179
	%	44.9	52.4	18.6	43.2
Chi square =		11.4	17.9	18.7	11.7
df =		2	2	2	2
p <		0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05

Clearly then, the simple bivariate relationships between pluralistic ignorance and communication are inadequate to explain why some individuals are successful at estimating the climate of public opinion and others are not. However, there are significant relationships between reported reading of the Agreement and all four interpersonal communication variables when pluralistic ignorance is controlled. There is also a bivariate relationship between reported reading of the Agreement and reported reading of newspapers.

TABLE 6. Number and Proportion of Respondents Reporting Reading Agreement by Reported Newspaper Reading.

Read Agreement		Read Newspaper: Today (n=621)	Read Newspaper: Daily (n=620)
No	n	109	121
	%	47.8	58.3
Some	n	206	237
	%	64.8	74.3
All	n	50	54
	%	66.7	72.9
Total	n	365	412
	%	58.8	66.4
Chi square =		17.9	27.8
df =		2	2
p <		0.005	0.001

As shown in Table 5, among those who correctly assessed the climate of opinion, proportionally more respondents who reported reading all of the

Agreement reported discussing the '1997' question (a) at home, (b) at work, (c) with someone on the telephone, and (d) while shopping in a store. Six in ten of those who had read the document reported talking about the issue at home (61.3%) and at work (66.1%) compared with just over three in ten of those who reported reading none of the Agreement.

Nearly four in ten (37.1%) of those who read all of the Agreement reported discussing the issue on the telephone compared with just one in ten of those who had read none of the agreement, and just half (50.05) reported talking about the issue in a store compared with 31.1% of those not reading the Agreement. There were no differences among the three levels of reading for respondents who had incorrectly assessed the climate of opinion.

As Table 6 indicates, those who read one kind of printed material are more likely to read another. Two thirds of those who reported reading the entire Agreement and 64.8% of those who had read some of the Agreement reported reading a newspaper "today." More than seven in ten of those reading all of the Agreement (72.9%) or some of the Agreement (74.3%) reported reading a newspaper on a daily basis. These proportions compare with 47.8% of those who read none of the Agreement reporting reading a newspaper "today," and 58.3% reporting reading a paper daily.

DISCUSSION

From the findings, it is clear that a majority of the Hong Kong respondents were able to accurately estimate the distribution of opinion regarding the approval/disapproval of the Draft Agreement. When this survey was conducted in January 1985, the '1997' issue had received more than two years of generous mass media coverage. Because the issue was so widely publicized, the crystallization hypothesis may account for the small proportion of pluralistic ignorance in the survey. During the period between November 1982 and January 1985, Hong Kong residents had had the opportunity to read copies of the Agreement that were published in newspapers and magazines as well as copies distributed by the Government Information Office. For nearly three years, the mass media had carried frequent news reports and opinion commentary about the governmental change that was scheduled to take place in '1997.' Because the issue was crystallized, it is doubtful that few Hong Kong residents would have been unaware of the anticipated future consequences that were to follow the shift between governing powers.

Yet, patterns of pluralistic ignorance appear in these data. Although the actual and estimated distributions of opinion are correlated significantly ($r = 0.665$, $p < 0.001$), nearly one-fifth of the respondents (17.2%) incorrectly estimated the actual distribution of public opinion. The pluralistically ignorant who disapproved of the agreement, and who perceived "most others" as being in agreement with them, when in fact nearly 85 percent of the respondents actually approved of the agreement, represent a minority perceiving itself to be the majority. This perceptual misinterpretation has traditionally been labeled "looking glass perception." That these respondents held more traditional beliefs might be

supported by results from a November 1982 study in which 81.8 percent of the respondents (n= 1213) doubted that Hong Kong would remain politically and economically stable under the governance of the People's Republic of China.

A second pattern of pluralistic ignorance appears in the data. Slightly less than one-tenth (8.0%) of those respondents who approved of the Draft Agreement estimated that "most other" Hong Kong residents disapproved of the Agreement. This group of pluralistically ignorant respondents represent a majority perceiving themselves to be a minority. Their misperceptions of the actual distribution of public opinion regarding the Agreement reflect a tendency toward "conservative bias."

Researchers have suggested that inaccurate estimates of the distribution of public opinion regarding an issue may result from limited information about an issue (Fields & Schuman, 1976-77; Breed & Ktsanes, 1961; O'Gorman, 1979). The data from the present study, in part, confirm such conjecture. The data suggest that Hong Kong residents who were sufficiently attentive to the news were better able to more accurately estimate the distribution of opinion.

However, the remainder of the communication variables examined in this study appear inadequate to the task in explaining the complex relationship among interpersonal communication and mass media variables and pluralistic ignorance. It appears that proportionally more ignorant respondents are more likely to engage in discussions about the '1997' issue at work than are non-ignorant respondents. Although the data do not provide a ready explanation for such an occurrence, it may be that the family members of the pluralistically ignorant are also ignorant; therefore, interpersonal communication at home about the '1997' may provide individuals with little

communication utility since it is highly likely that the individuals would share many of the same opinions and values with those with whom they live (Speier, 1950; O'Gorman, 1979). The ignorant may be more likely to profit discussions at work since they may be exposed to a greater variety of opinions and values there than at home. Thus, the marginal utility of interpersonal communication at work may be greater for the ignorant than the non-ignorant.

Although there were no reported differences in the proportions of the ignorant and non-ignorant reporting having read the Agreement itself, proportionally more of the non-ignorant who had read all of the Agreement were more likely to have reported talking about '1997' at home, at work, on the phone, or in a store. It also appears that those who were more likely to have read the Agreement, were more likely to have read a newspaper on a regular basis. Such a relationship between having read the Agreement and regular mass media use seems clear given that the media gave considerable coverage to the '1997' issue.

Clearly, the simple bivariate relationships between pluralistic ignorance and communication are inadequate to explain why some individuals are successful at estimating the climate of public opinion and others are not. It may well be that time-series data may provide a better estimate of the relationship between levels of pluralistic ignorance and communication variables. However, the data do suggest the relative importance of mass media and interpersonal communication among the Hong Kong residents.

Though past public opinion research examining pluralistic ignorance has to a great extent ignored communication variables in assessing the underlying causes of the phenomenon, the present study suggests the importance of investigating the relationships among communication variables and the actual and estimated distributions of public opinion. Perhaps these

data support the function of individuals' "mechanisms of observability" (Merton, 1968) manifest through their "intercommunicating behavior" which form what Cooley (1926) defined as social knowledge. Is it not "intercommunicating behavior" which reduces the misperception of public opinion? The answer yet remains unclear.

It may be that by 1985, the '1997' issue was too well-crystallized to to ascertain a clear-cut relationship among interpersonal and mass communication variables and pluralistic ignorance. Widespread publicity of the issue had converted the indeterminacy of 1982 into the reality of 1985. Perhaps the Hong Kong population had been saturated with media coverage of the issue; this might account for the indiscernible differences between the ignorant minority and non-ignorant majority in terms of media use. It is also possible that differences in media use may surface in advance of high levels of crystallization. Such conjecture forms the cornerstone for future investigations.

NOTES

1. Merton's "mechanism of observability" appears equivalent to Noelle-Neumann's "quasistatistical organ." Both terms refer to the individual's ability to estimate the distribution of opinion within a reference group or a more general public. The primary sources of information are, of course, interpersonal communication and the mass media.

2. While the phenomenon may have had scant attention in public opinion research, there is substantial literature in person perception and related literature. See, for example Tagiuri (1968) and Tagiuri and Petrullo (1958).

3. Conservative bias refers to tendency of those who favor a change in the status quo or the old social norms to see others as not favoring the change.

4. China technically was to regain administrative control only over the New Territories which London had leased in 1898 for 99 years. However, much of the argument has been about the question of sovereignty over the entire colony including Hong Kong Island and the tip of the Kowloon Peninsula. Wesley-Smith (1980) suggested that China has always retained residual sovereignty over the New Territories because the land was leased rather than ceded to Britain. China also demanded the return of Hong Kong Island and the 3.5 square miles of the Kowloon Peninsula both of which China ceded to Britain in perpetuity as a consequence of losing the Opium Wars of 1842 and 1860. China argued the land was ceded at the point of a gun, hence the treaties were invalid. Britain, of course, argued the contrary.

5. In November 1982, only 21.4% had agreed that China should regain both sovereignty and administrative control over Hong Kong; 56.9% disagreed and 21.7% were undecided (Atwood & Cheng, 1986). However, the question of the acceptability of the Agreement is not the same as the question as to whether anyone really approves of China regaining administrative control of Hong Kong.

6. There were no significant differences between the non-ignorant and ignorant respondents in terms of age, income, formal education, marital status or length of residence in Hong Kong.

7. Reading the news coverage of the Agreement in Hong Kong's major English-language newspaper, the South China Morning Post, leaves the reader with the impression that the Hong Kong elite did strongly support the Agreement, at least in the public print. The reader also receives the impression that those who do not approve of the document are, perhaps, somehow disloyal and threaten the stability and prosperity of the Colony.

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